

**Sermon: Cathedral, St Thomas**

**Habakkuk 2: 1-4**

**Ephesians 2: 19-end**

**John 20: 24-29**



**Focus statement:** There is still a vision and a promise.

**Function statement:** We wait in hope. We work in expectation. We resist not only our own despair but the despair of the world.

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

I have never been so glad not to be preaching as I was last week.... but this week isn't much better!

The pain and divisions which the EU referendum exposed – the responses of bitterness and hostility and racism which exploded in the wake of the result – and the political instability which came alongside them are perhaps even starker this week than they were last Sunday. We've had a week for it to sink in – and nothing seems to have got any better. In fact, things seem to be worse. Both the major political parties are in disarray. Promises are being broken. And people from across the country – EU citizens, people from ethnic minorities, people who have lived here all their lives but look different – are reporting racist attacks.

So how can we have hope on a day like today – after ten days like the last ten days – in a weekend where we remember the utter brutality of the Somme and the lives given for peace in Europe in two world wars, when we might well fear that those times will return?

Suggesting that there is hope even in dark times runs the risk of sounding facile. As we have seen in politics recently, despair is easier to sell than reassurance; it's easier to play on people's fear than to give them hope. But God calls us to be people of hope.

That's all of us, called to be hope for the world – hope that shows that there is something other than dark times. But before we can be hope, we have to have hope: hope in God's promise.

And that takes us back to the question of how we can have hope when things seem so dark?

Maybe we can start by saying that despair is not new. People have been in dark times before – and have survived them. The anniversary of the battle of the Somme, among the other First and Second world war anniversaries around this time, remind us of that. Hope is the way to beat dark times – and, in beating them, to build something new.

We are called to hope in God's promise: of resurrection, of the Kingdom, of justice and righteousness and peace.

And today, on the feast of Thomas the apostle, we see a snapshot of that hope in action. Of the difference that hope in God's promise – the assurance of God's promise – made in Thomas' life... and through him, to the world.

In the Gospel reading – one of the great Easter readings – we see Thomas brought from dark times into assurance and hope. He begins the reading separated from the other disciples: he is still in dark times. He is still waiting. Things seem hopeless.

But he has just enough hope to keep turning up, to persist in being with his friends – and just enough hope to set God a challenge. I won't believe it, he says, unless I see it with my own eyes.

And God shows up. God hears Thomas' challenge and – a week later – takes him on. God appears in Jesus and turns Thomas' tiny spark of hope into a flame. Takes Thomas out of his dark times. That's what resurrection does.

The times remained dark – the authorities were still hostile, Jesus still wasn't with them in the way that he had been. But Thomas had seen the Lord. His dark times had been illuminated by the light of the resurrection. His hope had been fanned into a flame that could sustain him.

And sustain him it did. Tradition says that he preached in India – maybe three or four thousand miles from his home country – and was martyred there. The power of resurrection, the power of hope, the power of God's promise fulfilled empowered Thomas to bring hope to the world.

That's all very well. But Thomas' world was less complicated than ours. Thomas only had one thing to worry about. Thomas had seen the risen Jesus – and surely that makes a difference!

One of the ways that despair tempts us is to tell us that we're in a particularly awful situation. We're special because we're especially badly off. Nobody else has ever been in times as dark as ours. We don't have to be inspired by hope, or overcome despair – everyone who's ever done that has been far better off than us.

But that's a lie. Thomas is not the only example of people empowered and sustained by hope. And none of us get a free pass. We are all called to be people of hope, not despair.

So if Thomas is too abstract or too special – he is, after all, an apostle; he did, after all, see the risen Jesus – for us to relate to, let's try the first reading.

The prophet Habbakuk could tell us a thing or two about living in dark times. Those of you who were at Evensong last night heard a great chunk of his prophecy in the fabulous Stanford setting For lo, I raise up – and I'm sure the choir will be able to tell you all about it at coffee! That prophecy tells of the violence and destruction wreaked upon the people of Israel by the Chaldeans – a huge and ruthless army, bitter and hasty, terrible and dreadful, sweeping by like the destructive wind of the desert, flying like birds of prey, devouring everything in their path. And yet that is not the end of the prophecy.

We heard in the first reading, the beginning of something new: of Habbakuk assertink his faith that God is still there, and of God promising that there is something to hope for, to put his faith in. Stanford's setting (a setting written in 1914, itself one of the darkest times of history) finishes with Habbakuk's triumphant assertion that God's promise stands. God's kingdom will come. God is greater than the destructive might of the

Chaldean army. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

God's promise stands. We can trust in the promise and in the vision of hope.

Habbakuk, like Thomas, had a spark of hope – enough to challenge God, enough to wait for God, enough to stand and keep watch, day after day. Thomas waited a week. Habbakuk may have waited years. But he kept watch, and God answered him. There is still a vision. The promise of justice and righteousness and peace is still valid. It may take a long time, but it will surely come.

That is our promise too: a promise that exists most fully, as Thomas found, in the resurrection of Jesus. It's a promise we can hold on to in dark times. The promise that can give us hope: enough hope to hang on, to wait for God. To work against despair and fear, racism and violence, and to work for God's future: the kingdom that we are called to hope in and to work for; the kingdom that God promises, where hope will be fulfilled.